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O N - L I N E

Finding Internet Sites on Elder Issues: Health and Human Services

Have you ever heard the term *information overload*? Do you feel it every time you try to find an exact piece of information on the Internet? Here's the place to start.

By Robin C. Schard

The Internet provides an astounding amount of information. Finding specific material, however, can be very frustrating. This is particularly true when dealing with elder issues that cut across many different subjects. Search engines are not really an efficient way to find information. They produce enormous result lists; they can be very slow; and each search engine has its own search language. Thankfully, there are a few other starting places that can seriously reduce Internet search time.

The best starting point is generally with the organization creating the required information. For issues that concern older persons, much of the information originates with the government. The Internet has been a great boon in fulfilling the government's need to disseminate information to the people. Information that was previously only available in a depository library is now accessible to anyone with Internet access. Not only is the material more accessible, but it is also more current.

Internet publications can be updated in a fraction of the time it takes to update printed material. This article will describe the information currently available from the Web pages of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and its agencies, including the Administration on Aging, the National Institute on Aging (NIA), and the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA).

The Department of Health and Human Services (<http://www.hhs.gov>) is the department "most concerned with the Nation's Human concerns . . . from newborn infants . . . to our most elderly citizens."¹ The material on the department's Web site varies as widely as does its mission. The pages include general information on the department itself, news and press releases, information concerning ongoing research, and links to agencies within Health and Human Services. Of particular interest, however, is *healthfinder*TM, which provides material on general and hot topics, such as Medicare or domestic violence. Each topic includes

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articles on the subject, as well as a list of individual organizations interested in the topic. For example, the section on Medicare gives a description of the program, statistics, and links to the Health Care Financing Administration, the National Hospice Organization, and other material. For quick access to specific subjects not included on the initial screen, healthfinder™ also has a rudimentary search engine. HHS's Web site is a great place to locate specific information on the department, general health-related information, or hypertext links to agencies within HHS, such as the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and others.

A better starting place for more general matters concerning older persons is the Resource Directory of Older People (<http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/resource.html>), a cooperative effort between the National Institute on Aging and the Administration on Aging. This site is primarily a compendium of organizations dealing with the concerns of older people, from the National Center on Elder Abuse to the National Senior Citizens' Law Center to the Social Security Administration. The researcher can find the appropriate information in two ways. The table of contents lists the entries in alphabetical order, providing a link to more detailed information. The list can also be searched. The "Search the Resource Directory" link leads the researcher to a very simple search engine. While the search

engine allows the use of basic connectors, such as "and" and "or," it works best with a single term or a simple phrase. The directory provides a wealth of information concerning each organization. The listings include the Internet and e-mail addresses (where available) as well as the mission, services, and publications of each entry. For example, the services of the Alzheimer's Association include funding research. The researcher can then visit their Web site (<http://www.alz.org>) to discover which drugs are in clinical trials or which current diagnostic procedures are being employed. The Resource Directory also furnishes the street address, telephone, and fax numbers, which are often annoyingly absent from other Web sites. The only drawback to this site is the lack of any grouping by subject. This problem can be alleviated by its search capabilities. While the Resource Directory for Older People does not provide substantive information on issues, it leads the researcher to organizations that will. Or, the searcher can begin their search with the HHS agencies directly involved in topics involving the older population: Administration on Aging (<http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/default.htm>) and National Institute on Aging (<http://www.nih.gov/nia>)

The Administration on Aging is the lead agency within the Department of Health and Human Services that deals with all issues concerning the older population. The Web site for the Administration on Aging provides Fact Sheets, information on pending legislation in

Congress, and other related information on Department of Health and Human Services and AoA actions. Another service from this Web site is the National Aging Information Center. The center responds to user's inquiries and provides a searchable database of publications and statistical information. Other useful services include a directory of state agencies on aging, retirement and financial planning online resources, and information on Eldercare Locator—a service that helps seniors and their caregivers locate local resources.

The National Institute on Aging, as one of the National Institutes of Health, conducts and supports research on health issues relating to older persons. Due to its mission, NIA's Web site provides mostly health-related information. The health information found there, however, is varied and timely. NIA publishes some useful booklets and articles on the Web site, everything from "Osteoporosis: The Silent Bone Thinner" to "The Women's Health and Aging Study: Health and Social Characteristics of Older Women with Disability." The press release pages provide information on new trials and other updates to NIA activities. The Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center's Web site (<http://www.alzheimers.org>) also provides information on new studies and many Web-accessible publications about Alzheimer's disease.

For access to Medicare or other insurance-related information, the Health Care Financing Agency's Web site provides a

good beginning. The Health Care Financing Agency is the agency that administers Medicare, Medicaid, and Children's Health Insurance Program. The Web site for HCFA (<http://www.hcfa.gov>) maintains general information on the agency, current initiatives, and detailed information on the specific programs. For each program, such as Medicare, the material is divided between consumer information and professional/technical information. For instance, while "Consumer Information" links to the Medicare Consumer Information Web site and the publication "Your Medicare Handbook," the "Professional/Technical Information" link leads to technical information such as information on the Medicare payment systems and

the Medicare Integrity Program. Nevertheless, the best source of information from the HCFA site is the Information Clearinghouse. In the Laws and Regulations section, the researcher can view advisory opinions, HCFA rulings, and related Acts and regulations. The Professional/Technical Publications section of the Information Clearinghouse also supplies valuable resources. The researcher can view or download the Medicare and Medicaid program manuals. The 1998 Chart Book is also available for downloading as are HCFA reports and newsletters. The beginning of each section also describes what computer system requirements are needed for access to the files. Other sections of the Information Clearinghouse include Statistics,

Local Information, and Public Affairs.

Overall, the Department of Health and Human Services is one governmental entity that is making effective use of the Internet. For those seeking information on elder issues, these Web sites provide valuable, substantive information covering a wide range of topics. These publications, and all of the additional information on the sites, have proven to be reliable, current, and easily accessible.

Endnotes

1. Office of Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration, UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT MANUAL 1997/98, p. 271 (1997).

Internet Sites Mentioned in This Article

Health and Human Services
 Resource Directory of Older People
 Alzheimers Association
 Administration on Aging
 National Institute on Aging
 Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center
 Health Care Financing Administration
 Medicare

<http://www.hhs.gov>
<http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/resource.html>
<http://www.alz.org>
<http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/default.htm>
<http://www.nih.gov/nia>
<http://www.alzheimers.org>
<http://www.hcfa.gov>
<http://www.hcfa.gov/medicare/medicare.htm>